

The Debate That Started it All

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Debates are one of the ways that countries are transformed and ideas are conveyed.

History encompasses many debates. One type of debate is a presidential debate. During 1858, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas debated various topics. On August 21 in Ottawa, Illinois, Lincoln's and Douglas' debate revolved around slavery, and showed that Lincoln wanted to abolish slavery whereas Douglas wanted to keep slavery.

Differences about slavery got the Civil War started.

First, the debate was ultimately about slavery and involved a discussion about the Dred Scott case, the Nebraska Bill, and the existence of the United States as half free and half masters with slaves. The Dred Scott Case was about Dred Scott, a black slave who moved with his master to a free state and married. Then, his master died. Dred Scott attempted to buy his own freedom, but the wife of his former master did not allow it, and the court ruled that he was not a citizen; hence the laws of the state did not apply to him. Next, the Kansas-Nebraska Act that Douglas helped write divided Kansas into the Kansas Territory and the Nebraska Territory. The bill also stated that the occupants of those territories would determine whether they wanted slavery or not. Finally, about half of the states in the United States allowed slavery, and the other half did not. This showed inconsistency in laws from state to state and a further separation between states. Also, Lincoln had said in June that, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." He emphasized that the country needs to be consistent on important laws.

In the debate, Lincoln opposed slavery and Douglas was ready to tolerate it.

Lincoln opposed the ruling of the Dred Scott Case because the verdict showed that blacks did not have the same rights as whites and that Judge Taney did not fully assess the claims from Dred Scott. Douglas stated that he was “opposed to negro citizenship in any and every form.” Secondly, Lincoln thought that taking slaves from Africa, which was outlawed, and then bringing them into Kansas was the same crime, so he believed that the new states should not have slavery. However, Douglas believed that it was right for the states to choose whether they wanted to have slavery or not. Thirdly, Lincoln did not like the idea of slavery, but he was not against the states that already had slavery or the idea that whites were superior. Douglas, agreeing with Lincoln, states that great men before their time made the states so that some were slave states and some were free states.

Lastly, the ideas about slavery eventually led to the Civil War, which was fueled by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Lincoln's election as president, and economic inequality between the North and South. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* one figure stated, “We don't own your laws; we don't own your country; we stand here as free, under God's sky, as you are; and, by the great God that made us, we'll fight for our liberty till we die.” This statement proves that the African Americans were not being treated the same as white slave owners, which was important for the start of the Civil War. The South also did not like it that Abraham Lincoln did not approve of slavery yet was elected president. Since the South thought that Lincoln would outlaw slavery, they seceded. Lastly, the South did not control foreign trade or have banks like the North. Even though the North was stronger economically than the South, the two sections depended upon each other because of trade. The South only saw that the North was reaping all of the benefits, and that fact contributed to the friction between the South and North that started the Civil War.

The debate in Ottawa, Illinois was a success because it was the first debate between Lincoln and Douglas. This particular debate showed how the two men saw slavery extremely differently, proved that Lincoln wanted to end slavery and Douglas was willing to keep the tradition, and how the basis of the Civil War, slavery, was finally debated in public. This debate also displayed the differences between Lincoln's and Douglas' physical stature and the way they conducted themselves. Douglas was short, fiery, and self-confident, whereas Lincoln was tall, humorous, humble, and uncertain. All of those differences put together indicated clearly what each man was like. People could vote with accuracy, therefore. [From *First Debate With Stephen A. Douglas at Ottawa, Illinois*. <<http://www.nps.gov/archive/liho/debate1.htm>> (Oct. 14, 2007); Jennifer Erbach, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858*. <http://americanhistory.about.com/od/civilwarmenu/a/cause_civil_war.htm> (Oct. 18, 2007); J. G. Randall and David Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; and Paul Wellman, *The House Divides*.]